

Upminster Windmill in Essex - part one



UPMINSTER WINDMILL IN ESSEX is considered to be one of the finest examples of a Smock windmill remaining in England. It was built in 1803 by a local farmer, Mr. James Noakes and was provided with a steam mill for additional milling capacity, in 1811. It was sold several times over until finally coming under the ownership of Essex County Council in 1937 who intended demolishing it, but, such was local interest and opposition, and Hornchurch Urban District Council started a fund for the preservation of the Mill. However, the WWII intervened and the mill declined until, in 1960, Essex County Council with a more enlightened policy than in 1937, purchased additional land and demolished the Mill house, the steam plant and all the other out-buildings. Bob Sharp now takes up the story, until his retirement in 2007 when Hampshire Mills Group gained his

membership. Bob and Sheila now live in Lymington.

THE MILL AND I by Bob Sharp

My interest in Upminster Windmill began in 1967 when the Hornchurch & District Historical Society opened it to the public as part of the London Borough of Havering's first Arts Festival. This was intended to be a one-off opening but the interest was so great that the Society decided to continue to open the mill on a regular basis from 1968 onwards.

On that first open day, about 1800 people visited the mill and we were four of them. Sheila had to carry our youngest daughter, Vanessa who was only one year old at the time, up and down the mill. That first visit was conducted by a certain George Berry who was a gunnery instructor during the war and as a result was superbly able to hold the attention of a group of people. The Society interested me so I became a member, attending the winter of 1967/68 series of meetings, and volunteered to become a windmill guide. George helped me learn about the mill and he and his family became firm friends of ours. Our interests were similar and we went on most of the Society's outings to places of historic interest. I was invited to join the Society's executive committee and became chairman of the Windmill Sub-Committee, responsible for running open days and purchasing memorabilia for sale, succeeding the Society's treasurer who had moved to Surrey. I also became involved in many of the Society's other activities, particularly those of an industrial archaeological nature, and became chairman around 1972. One project I initiated was the excavation of a lock chamber on the Romford Canal near the Ford works at Dagenham. The canal was started in the 19th century but never completed. The lock chamber was filled in during the war as it was considered that moonlight reflected from the water which it still held would be a navigation aid to German aircraft. With the River Thames less than half a mile away it seemed to me that the chamber was unlikely to be a major landmark.

Returning to the windmill, one of the sail stocks cracked in 1970 and the sail leaned over alarmingly. Millwrights Philip Lennard and Vincent Pargeter were contracted by Havering Council to carry out repairs. The new sails they fitted were, in fact, built by Chris Wilson. I was able to spend some time with Philip and Vincent when they were working there and was able to learn from them. These sails and their stocks lasted until January 2007 when the 'forward' stock broke during a gale. A few years later Philip, then in partnership with John Lawn, replaced the rotting cills on the top of the brick ground floor base. He cut out the rotten wood and replaced it with concrete working round the mill in stages. New cills were fitted on top of the concrete. The rotted bottoms of the cant posts were cut away and the posts secured to the new cills via steel brackets.

There was no form of lighting in the mill, a particular disadvantage at ground floor level where there are no windows. I fitted some small caravan type fluorescent fittings which we ran from batteries which I re-charged before every opening. These lights allowed us to start putting up displays such as a brief history of the mill.

Before the National Lottery was set up, Havering Borough Council had their own lottery, the proceeds of which were applied to local projects. I had for quite a time thought that mains electricity would be a great advantage and so I applied for funding in 1980.

My application was successful on the basis that the installation within the mill would be carried out by volunteers. The lottery fund agreed to pay for all materials and the mains connection, which entailed digging a trench over 100 yds long for the supply cable. Installation of the lighting and power circuits was to be carried out by volunteer labour using steel wire armoured cable. This was specified as it was considered that volunteers would not be skilled in the use of mineral insulated cable. In fact I did at least 95% of the installation myself, mainly alone. This would not be tolerated in today's H & S (over-conscious?) society! MK Electrical and Phillips Lighting donated many items and MK printed an article about the mill in their house magazine. Amusingly, three-phase cable was used for the mains connection although a single phase supply was to be provided. When this was realised the trench was re-opened and the cable replaced although I suggested it could be used for the single phase so that we should have the necessary cable should we need to have a three phase supply in the future but this was not acceptable to Eastern Electricity. The current restoration and development proposals suggest the provision of a three phase supply! Availability of mains electricity proved a great boon, not only for display purposes but also allowed the use of power tools when we or contractors were working at the mill.

We had been aware that there was noticeable deterioration in the structure of the fan stage and I persuaded the Chief Librarian (Havering Borough Library held the purse strings) that repair was essential. Millwrights International were contracted to do the work in 1983. The fan stage was removed and taken to their works near Henley-on Thames. New over-sheers, rear weather-beam and braces were made but the existing fly posts were used with rotted areas cut out and new wood inserted. Over twenty years on these timbers still appear sound, needing little more than careful repainting, although the fan-tail itself has had to be removed. A new one is at present being made by the Friends of Upminster Windmill.

Apart from the fan stage and cill repairs two complete re-paintings were carried out during the time I was involved with the mill,. The first one of these was done with traditional lead oxide based paint. A micro-porous paint was used in the second. (I have been un-impressed with the performance of this paint although it was apparently applied in accordance with the

manufacturer's recommendations.) Some re-cladding was done at this time but the overlap of the boards was insufficient in some areas, allowing water penetration. There also appeared to be penetration through the boards. On both occasions the mill was completely scaffolded which gave me the opportunity to examine the cladding and other details at close quarters. No work was carried out on the reefing gallery at this time although I had become increasingly concerned about its condition to the extent that we stopped allowing visitors out onto it.

By 1994 I had become increasingly concerned about the general condition of the mill and in 1995 Dave Pearce and Alan Wallis helped me survey the mill and prepare a report which we submitted to the Council. This at last triggered debate about how best to ensure the restoration of the mill and, in best local authority tradition, a steering committee was set up. This consisted of the Chief Librarian, an ex-mayor, a councillor concerned with local history and myself.

In 1995 a work colleague at GEC-Marconi, who was also an amateur radio enthusiast, suggested that it would be interesting to run a 'HAM' station from the mill as its location should enable good communication on the HF (short wave) amateur bands. This proved a great success and was actually the start of HAM stations at mills on National Mills Week-ends. After I retired the Havering Amateur Radio Club took over and has run the station every year since then. Of late they have also run stations at Aythorpe Roding and Mountnessing mills.

In 1998 my fears about the reefing gallery were confirmed when part of it collapsed under me while I was inspecting the soakers fitted by Philip Leonard when he replaced the cills. Being somewhat distracted, I did not try to estimate my terminal velocity but the impact with the ground was painful! I wrote to the Council pointing out that we hoped for more visitors than usual in 2000 and that it would help greatly to have the reefing stage available. A grant towards repairs was obtained from Havering Cleanaway Riverside Trust under the landfill tax scheme and the Council also found money. The gallery was 'temporarily' repaired in readiness for the 2000 season and visitors were then allowed onto the gallery. Unfortunately Health and Safety considerations have since then again prevented visitors being allowed access.



The Council was then, as (unremarkably) usual, short of money and could not afford to fund a full restoration. It was realised that external funding would be necessary and the Council commissioned a cost and feasibility study which was submitted in August 2000, recommending the creation of a building preservation trust with a supporting group of volunteers. Accordingly I held

an open meeting in 2001 and the Friends of Upminster Windmill was inaugurated, I being elected chairman. I invited a number of members of the Friends to become trustees of the Upminster Windmill Preservation Trust which was incorporated as a charitable trust in 2003 and was elected chairman of that as well. The Friends gradually took over running open days from the Historical Society from 2002 onwards and became a registered charity in 2002.